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## THERE'S NO RACIAL JUSTICE WITHOUT ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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### SHORTCOMINGS OF CLINTON'S RACE INITIATIVE REPORT

By Peter Dreier, *Social Policy*, 0037-7783, December 1, 1998, Vol. 29, Issue 2

President Clinton had hoped that one of his major legacies would be to foster a new climate of racial reconciliation, but the tepid report of his Initiative on Race, released in September, offered no road map toward that lofty goal.

Waves of social and economic reform typically require three things: a widely-shared analysis of the problem, a policy program for change, and a political vehicle for mobilizing a constituency.

The report offers some useful analysis of the nation's racial history and current racial conditions, but it fails to focus on the major obstacle to racial conciliation--the widening disparities of wealth and income.

Similarly, the report has lots of good ideas about what to do to address the troubling conditions that it catalogs. But the recommendations are all over the map, from urging Americans to be more tolerant to asking the mass media to eliminate racial stereotypes, from changing our practices regarding such areas as early childhood learning, policing, job training, and housing development to raising the minimum wage.

Finally, it is well known that Presidential commissions and blue-ribbon task forces rarely have much impact unless there is a well-organized constituency prepared to mount a campaign to translate the report's recommendations into public policy. The report exhorts Americans to change their ways, but makes no distinctions about who is likely to win and lose (and thus who is likely to support and oppose) in the struggle for racial reconciliation. Most conspicuous by its absence is the lack of any serious attention paid to the labor movement as a vehicle for building a majoritarian political constituency for racial and economic justice.

The report's scattershot approach is understandable, since so many aspects of American life are intertwined with race. But this makes it difficult to get a handle on what to do--what's most important. Indeed, due in part to the lack of a clear focus, the news media barely paid attention to the report when it was released. (They were more interested in the controversies about the panel's composition and its deliberations than in its conclusions.) This, in turn, makes it difficult to build much political support for the report's recommendations.

The report acknowledges the dramatic racial progress of the past three decades. Thanks to the civil rights revolution, we've witnessed the significant growth of the African-American and Latino/a middle class and the dramatic decline of the overt daily terror imposed on Black Americans, especially in the South. Racial minorities are now visible in positions of leadership and influence in almost every sphere of American life. There are impressive numbers of Black and Latino/a political leaders, many of whom have garnered cross-racial support. The number of people of color in Congress, as well as those at local and state levels of government, has grown significantly. A growing number of large, predominantly white cities have elected Black and Latino/a mayors. Douglas Wilder became the first Black governor. Jesse Jackson ran for President, and Ron Dellums became chair of the House Armed Services Committee. Colin Powell led the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Colleges and the professions have opened up to Blacks and Latino/as. Thirty years ago there were hardly any people of color on Fortune 500 corporate boards, as TV newscasters and daily newspaper editors, or as presidents and administrators of major colleges and hospitals. That is no longer the case. Although the glass ceiling persists, we have moved beyond tokenism.

Despite this progress, race remains a divisive issue in America. The poverty rate among Black and Latino/a Americans is three times that of white America. Almost half of Black children live in poverty. Our residential areas remain racially segregated. Almost two-thirds of Black Americans live in blocks that are 60 percent or more Black, and 30 percent live in neighborhoods that are 90 percent or more Black. At least two out of three white Americans live in essentially all-white neighborhoods. In most major

American cities, more than 70 percent of the population would have to move to achieve full integration. Even when Black people move to the suburbs, they are likely to live in segregated areas--not because they prefer to do so, but because of persistent (though subtle) racial bias by banks and real estate brokers. As a result of residential segregation, our public schools are still segregated by race as well as income. Blacks and Latino/as still feel the sting of discrimination in the workplace and by the police and the criminal justice system.

## **CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY FOR RACIAL DIVISION**

Some analysts see these conflicting trends as a paradox. It is not. The essence of America's troubled race relations can be summarized by the following observation: Corporate America has learned to live with affirmative action and laws against racial discrimination, but it steadfastly opposes policies to promote full employment, universal health care, and affordable housing for all. There is still more to be done to assimilate people of color into the professional middle class and even into the upper class. But even if Blacks, Latinos, and Asians composed their "fair share" of this top tier, it would not significantly challenge mainstream institutions or threaten the power and privilege of the corporate elite. However, full employment and decent wages, universal health coverage, and an adequate supply of affordable housing for all Americans challenge the foundation of the business elite's power and profits.

Not surprisingly, the report failed to focus on the major obstacle to racial reconciliation: the nation's widening disparities of wealth and income. Today, the top 1 percent of the population has a larger share of the nation's wealth than the bottom 90 percent. The richest 5 percent of the nation own 61.4 percent of total wealth and have 20.3 percent of total income. The most affluent 20 percent of Americans have 84.3 percent of all wealth and 46.8 percent of total income.

Real racial progress means more than bringing people of color into the nation's economic, political, and media power elite (the top 1 percent) or even into the professional middle class that comprises the top one-fifth of the population.

Our goal should not simply be racial equality among the wealthy. It should be more wealth equality among all races.

The vast majority of Americans of all races are on a slippery economic slope. As the middle class gets hollowed out by these widening disparities, the basic components of the American Dream--a steady job with decent pay and health benefits, homeownership, sending one's children to college, and having at least a week's paid vacation--increasingly are out of reach. In the past two decades, the majority of American workers (including many white-collar and professional employees) have seen their incomes decline. A recent Census Bureau report revealed that 18 percent of the nation's full-time workers earn poverty-level wages, compared with 12 percent who had such earnings in 1979. The "working poor" are the fastest growing part of the low-income population.

## **THE ECONOMY AND RACIAL JUSTICE**

If there is one truth about race relations, it is that prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination decline when everyone has basic economic security. It is simplistic to argue that if you give people a decent and steady job, their hearts and minds will follow, but it is certainly true that full employment at decent wages makes interracial cooperation much more likely. In hard times, competition over a shrinking pie (or the crumbs from the economy's table) lead to resentments, bitterness, and racial tensions. Studies show, for example, that the number of lynchings went up whenever the Southern cotton economy declined. More recently, economic hard times are correlated with increases in the murder rate, racial violence, and hate crimes. The current rancor over affirmative action reflects this reality. (Consider that voters in Washington State last November approved a statewide referendum to raise the minimum wage while approving a ballot initiative to eliminate affirmative action).

We need to remind ourselves that economic justice is a precondition for racial justice. We need a broad policy agenda that will help unite Americans who are on the bottom three-quarters of the economic ladder around a common vision of the American Dream. These are the vast majority of Americans--white, black, brown, yellow, and all shades in-between--who are currently not benefiting from the nation's recent economic upturn and who will certainly suffer even more during the next inevitable downturn of the business cycle.

## **LABOR MUST TAKE THE LEAD**

Organized labor is the most important vehicle for challenging the widening gap between rich and poor, corporate layoffs, a dramatic increase in temporary and part-time work, major cutbacks in government social programs, and the export of good jobs to antiunion states and to low-wage countries. But the Advisory Board report is silent on the important role that unions have played and can play in addressing racial and economic injustice.

The erosion of America's labor movement is the chief reason for the declining wages and living standards and the nation's widening economic disparities. Union membership has declined to 16 percent of the workforce--the lowest since the Great

Depression. (Omitting government employees, unions represent only 11 percent of private-sector workers.) Some of American labor's decline is due to the erosion of manufacturing industries where unions were strong and the growth of service-sector employment where unions have so far made few inroads.

Much of labor's decline is due to outdated labor laws that give management an unfair advantage in all aspects of union activity. This policy bias has been compounded by the antiunion policies of the National Labor Relations Board (especially during the 12 years of the Reagan and Bush Administrations) that routinely sided with management when overseeing union elections.

Labor's decline is also due to the union movement's own failure to put more resources into organizing new workers and new types of workplaces. The ouster of long-time AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland in 1996 was engineered by labor activists frustrated by the union movement's inertia.

After decades of decline, the sleeping giant of American unionism seems to be waking up. A new generation of labor activists, including a growing number of African-American, Latino, and Asian leaders, has been shaking up the labor movement, with a renewed strategy of organizing unorganized workers (especially people of color) and restoring the labor movement's political clout. In the last election, for example, unions played an important role in mobilizing both members and non-members, significantly expanding voter turnout and helping to elect some progressive Democrats in key swing districts. In at least a dozen cities, local unions, working in coalitions with community and clergy groups, have mobilized "living wage" campaigns to increase living standards of low-wage workers employed by firms with local government contracts. In Los Angeles (where Miguel Contreras, who started his union activism with the United Farm Workers, heads the County Federation of Labor), the vast majority of those covered by the new law are Latino/a, Asian, and African American.

## LABOR'S MIXED RECORD ON RACE

Unions have a complex history with regard to race relations. On the one hand, they have often been one of the few institutions where workers of all races have both common interests and somewhat equal footing. Throughout this century, progressive unions have been at the forefront of fighting for racial justice, as well as giving people of color opportunities to develop leadership and political skills. On the other hand, conservative elements (primarily craft unions, but also, at times, industrial unions) were themselves racist both within their own unions and on matters of politics and public policy.

Despite this mixed legacy, civil rights leaders like A. Phillip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Jesse Jackson recognized that unions and racial minorities share a common agenda. They understood that appeals to racial pride, without a larger vision of economic justice that cuts across racial divisions, are a dead end. Randolph, the founder of the first Black trade union (Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), mobilized civil rights activists during World War II to push the federal government to integrate defense plants and the army. The 1963 March on Washington--famous for King's "I Have a Dream" speech--was Randolph's idea. The labor movement, especially the United Auto Workers, played a key role in organizing (and funding) the march and in exerting pressure to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

When King was murdered in 1968, he was in Memphis to lead a demonstration of predominantly Black sanitation workers who were on strike. Cesar Chavez combined appeals to racial pride, economic justice, and social conscience to build the United Farm Workers union, significantly improving the wages, working conditions, and environmental circumstances among agricultural workers. Jesse Jackson has spent much of the past decade walking picket lines and preaching the union gospel of class solidarity among white, Black, and Latino/a workers.

Union strength, which reached a peak of 35 percent in the mid-1950s, allowed American workers, especially blue-collar workers, to share in the postwar prosperity and join the middle class. Union pay scales even helped boost the wages of non-union workers. Unionized workers continue to have higher wages, better pensions, longer vacations and maternity leaves, and better health insurance than their nonunion counterparts.

But until the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Black Americans did not gain their fair slice of these economic gains. With organized labor as an ally, the civil rights crusade helped many Black Americans move into the economic mainstream. They gained access to good-paying jobs--in factories, government, and professional sectors--that previously had been off-limits. In unionized firms, the wage gap between Black and white workers narrowed significantly. Whites and Blacks not only earn roughly the same wages, they both earn more than workers without union representation. According to the Economic Policy Institute, unionized Black males earn 15.1 percent more than Black people in comparable non-union jobs; for whites, the union "wage premium" is 14.9 percent. It is 18.7 percent for Latino/as.

## THE ROLE OF THE REBORN LABOR MOVEMENT

A new cohort of labor leaders at both the national and local levels is now seeking to rekindle the "movement" spirit of activist unionism, in part by focusing on sectors composed disproportionately of women, people of color, and immigrants. In the past few

years, overall union membership has inched upward for the first time in decades because of innovative organizing drives such as the nationwide "Justice for Janitors" campaign and the Service Employees union's recent success organizing health care workers in Las Vegas.

AFL-CIO president John Sweeney was elected in 1996 pledging to lead the American labor movement out of the economic desert by mobilizing a new wave of union organizing and recruiting a new generation of organizers, especially activists who are people of color. Sweeney's goal is not only to expand the number of union members, but to increase labor's political clout, in part by creating a program to train political campaign workers from unions' rank and file. A key component of this strategy is to increase voter registration and turnout among union members, the poor, and people of color. Labor's efforts in the 1996 and 1998 elections suggest that Sweeney has already helped change the political culture of the union movement. But this success will be limited until unions expand their membership.

Unions that have made the most headway in recent years have drawn on the tactics and themes of civil rights crusades and grassroots organizing campaigns, according to a study by labor expert Kate Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University. Union drives that emphasize dignity and justice and that forge alliances with community and church groups have been the most successful.

Surveys consistently show that Blacks and Latino/as are more favorably inclined toward unions than whites in similar jobs. In fact, since 1980, Bronfenbrenner found, workplaces with the highest percentage of minority workers are the most likely to win union elections. Workplaces with more than 75 percent people of color vote for union representation 66 percent of the time.

For years, most unions, including those with increasing numbers of people of color in their rank-and-file membership, have been led by white males. This has begun to change. The AFL-CIO recently expanded its executive council from 35 to 51 members to add more women and people of color. As a result, representation of people of color on the board doubled from 11 to 22 percent. Perhaps more importantly, a growing number of key union staffers and local union leaders are people of color.

Rebuilding the nation's labor movement is not a panacea for racial division, but it is a necessary first precondition. It is no accident that advanced industrialized nations with narrower economic disparities, better health and child-care policies, fewer children in poverty, and higher rates of social mobility also have a significantly higher level of unionization.

A stronger labor movement, working with allies among community and clergy groups, women's organizations, civil rights groups, and others, is essential if the nation is to mobilize around an agenda of economic prosperity, economic justice, and racial reconciliation. In contrast to the Race Initiative report's scattershot recommendations, we need a coherent program around which to mobilize the vast majority of Americans who are not getting their fair share of the nation's economic prosperity.

## GETTING TO THE PROMISED LAND

The labor movement's political agenda looks strikingly similar to the policy prescriptions of most progressive African-American and Latino/a leaders and organizations. It includes a new wave of job-creating public investment in the nation's crumbling infrastructure, increasing the minimum wage to the poverty level (and indexing it to inflation), and protecting social programs like Medicare, food stamps, and subsidized housing. It also includes universal national health insurance, restoration of progressive taxation (and expanding the earned income tax credit), renewed funding for public education, expansion of job training programs, and bringing family policies (maternity/paternity leaves, vacation time, and child care) up to the level of our Canadian and European counterparts. And it includes stronger enforcement of workplace safety regulations and of anti-discrimination laws like the Community Reinvestment Act and Fair Housing Act.

Reforming the nation's outdated labor laws should also be a key part of the progressive agenda for racial progress. Surveys show that a majority of American employees want union representation. But they won't vote for a union if they feel their jobs are at stake. Any employer with a clever labor attorney can stall union elections, giving the boss enough time to scare the living daylights out of potential recruits. And according to one study, one in ten workers involved in an organizing drive is fired. The lucky ones get back pay and reinstatement five years after the fact.

American employers can require workers to attend meetings on work time where company managers and consultants give anti-union speeches, show anti-union films, and distribute anti-union literature. By contrast, unions have no equivalent rights of access to employees. To reach them, union organizers frequently must visit their homes or hold secret meetings.

The rules are stacked against workers, making it extremely difficult for even the most committed and talented organizers and workers to win union elections. Our nation's cumbersome labor laws deprive workers of elementary rights of free speech and assembly in an atmosphere free of intimidation. Fixing these crusty laws is key to providing American workers a democratic voice in the workplace.

In his last speech in Memphis shortly before his death 30 years ago, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., said that "as a people, we will get to the promised land." With the end of the Cold War and with our nation again prospering economically, we have an unprecedented opportunity to fulfill the American Dream for all. Achieving that goal as we enter the 21st century is akin to entering the promised land. But it will take bold action and political mobilization.

## A STAMP FOR MALCOLM X; A CAMPAIGN FOR PAUL ROBESON

How nice to see Malcolm X's radical visage looking out at us from the improbable perch of a new 33 cent stamp. Wonders never cease, even if they are few and far between in this reactionary age.

Malcolm's breakthrough made us wonder what became of the campaign to get Paul Robeson on a US stamp. There was a big push leading up to his centennial last April, but to no avail. The Paul Robeson Hundredth Birthday Committee, out of Columbia College in Chicago, continues to urge the collection of signatures to honor the great radical in this way.

Petitions should be sent to the US Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee, 475 L'Enfant Plaza, SW, Rm. 4485, Washington, DC 20260-6750. Copies should be sent to the Paul Robeson Hundredth Birthday Committee, Columbia College, Chicago, IL 60605. The Robeson committee has a website at <http://www.pobox.com/~robeson/> and can be e-mailed at [robeson.centennial@pobox.com](mailto:robeson.centennial@pobox.com)

Mark Rogovin, director of the Robeson committee, is promoting a booklet for teachers that includes a timeline of Robeson's life and concurrent world events. It's \$7.95 plus \$1.50 for shipping. He also reminded us that 2000 is the 200th birthday year for abolitionist John Brown and slave revolt leader Nat Turner. A petition campaign to get them on stamps is underway as well.

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